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Author(s): David W. Warby

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The Book of Mormon Sheds Valuable Light on the Ancient Israelite Law of False Prophecy¹

David W. Warby

The Book of Mormon sheds valuable light on the textual interpretation of the ancient Israelite law of false prophecy. For many centuries Rabbis have defined false prophecy as the inaccurate prediction of the future and have punished it as a capital offense.² However, during the twentieth century, two scholars, Moses Bottenwieser and Peter C. Craigie, proposed that the biblical text supports an alternative definition of a false prophet: one who advocates false doctrine or divinely forbidden action.³ A close examination of Book of Mormon trials reveals that the Nephites—themselves an ancient Israelite group—likely applied this alternative doctrinal interpretation in their courts, and in some cases, may have used both definitions.

The crime of false prophecy derives from Deuteronomy 18:20, which states that “the prophet, which shall presume to speak a word in my name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or that shall speak in the name of other gods, even that prophet shall die.” Deuteronomy 18:21–22 sets forth the method for determining if a prophet is false: “And if thou say in thine heart, How shall we know the word which the Lord hath not spoken? When a prophet speaketh in the name of the Lord, if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which the Lord hath not spoken, but the prophet hath spoken it presumptuously: Thou shalt not be afraid of him.”

DAVID W. WARBY *obtained his J.D. from Brigham Young University, J. Reuben Clark Law School, in 1982. He practiced law in Washington state for thirteen years and now teaches Special Education at Marysville-Pilchuck High School in Marysville, Washington.*

The rabbinic interpretation of this scripture makes the crime virtually unenforceable for lack of a standard stating how long a court would have to wait to determine that the prophecy could never be fulfilled. The Rabbis further diluted the law by saying that only prophecies of blessings could prove a prophet false because failure of cataclysmic prophecies could be the result of repentance. Therefore, the rabbinic reading would only permit conviction of false prophets who prophesied blessings the court somehow concluded could never come to pass. Reason suggests either that the Lord intended the capital offense to be more enforceable than the rabbinic interpretation allows or that the definition of the crime itself has changed.

In 1914, Moses Bottenwieser said he would translate Deuteronomy 18:22 as identifying the false prophet by his speaking “in the name of YHWH that which shall not be or occur,”⁴ meaning a false prophet is one who tells people to do that which the Lord has forbidden. In 1976, Peter C. Craigie, with a much less detailed analysis, similarly concluded: “The Hebrew rendered literally is ‘the word is not.’ . . . That is, the word has no substance, or that what the prophet says simply ‘is not so.’ That is, the word supposedly spoken by God through the prophet was not in accord with the word of God already revealed and it was therefore automatically suspect.”⁵

Despite Bottenwieser’s extensive analysis, he can cite only one historical trial as precedent to refute the centuries-old tradition of the Rabbis. Bottenwieser centers his argument around the trial of Jeremiah, which took place about 608 B.C., or about thirteen years after the rediscovery of the Deuteronomic law (see 2 Chronicles 34:14; 2 Kings 22:8). This precedent is very weak, for Bottenwieser requires us to assume as fact the widely debated theory that Jeremiah stood trial for the crime of false prophecy and that a transcription error converted a conviction into an acquittal. Therefore, it is no wonder the rabbinic interpretation still receives common acceptance.⁶

This paper examines Book of Mormon precedent almost certainly unknown to Battenwieser or Craigg. Approximately seven years after the trial of Jeremiah (or some twenty-one years after the rediscovery of the Deuteronomic law), the prophet Lehi risked the lives of his sons to bring the law of Moses with him from Jerusalem to what would eventually be called America (see 1 Nephi 1–5).

About 100 B.C., the wicked King Noah, a descendant of Lehi who ruled over an isolated group of these new world Israelites, maintained a court of hand-picked, corrupt priests. One of his subjects, Abinadi, prophesied that doom would befall the king and his priests for their wickedness. He was brought before the king and his priests for questioning, “that they might cross him, that thereby they might have wherewith to accuse him” (Mosiah 12:29). The priests responded civilly to Abinadi despite his stinging accusations until Abinadi said what the king took as a capital offense. At this point King Noah abruptly cut off Abinadi’s discourse to command his priests, “Away with this fellow, and slay him; for what have we to do with him, for he is mad” (Mosiah 13:1).

Insanity was never a Hebrew crime. In fact, the insane could probably expect support from the community.⁷ However, the King James Version of the Bible translates the Hebrew term *mesugga* as referring to someone who is “mad.” One scholar states that although the Hebrew word *mesugga* literally means “one that is insane,” it was applied anciently to false prophets “because they boasted that they were under a divine impulse, when they spoke their own thoughts.”⁸ Thus Hosea said his critics considered him *mesugga*, or “mad” (Hosea 9:7). The same Hebrew word was similarly used to scorn the young prophet that Elisha sent to anoint Jehu king of Israel (2 Kings 9:11). The false prophet Shemiah similarly, but inaccurately, reproved the high priest in Jerusalem for not punishing Jeremiah as a “man who is mad [*mesugga*], and maketh himself a prophet” (Jeremiah 29:26). Another commentator said of this designation:

Language of this type is frequently used by the establishment to characterize peripheral prophets whose claims are not accepted. The symptoms of spirit possession are capable of being understood either as an indication of genuine intermediation or as a sign of mental illness. The latter evaluation indicates that the society refuses to recognize the possessed individual as a divine intermediary.⁹

Thus, when King Noah angrily declared Abinadi worthy of death because he was “mad,” the king likely declared Abinadi guilty of false prophecy. What did Abinadi say that gave King Noah cause to think he had finally proven Abinadi guilty of false prophecy?

Abinadi later said to the king and his priests, “Because I have told you the truth ye are angry with me [but] because I have spoken the word of God ye have judged me that I am mad” (Mosiah 13:4). Abinadi had earlier made it clear that God sent him, but that claim merely inflamed the court to seek a crime with which to charge him. The reason for the sudden verdict must therefore be found in the particular content of Abinadi’s message at the moment Noah cut him off to order him executed.

We are blessed with a very accurate account of Abinadi’s conversation with Noah’s court. Alma, one of the younger judges who was expelled from the court for siding with Abinadi, hid from Noah and recorded “all the words Abinadi had spoken” (Mosiah 17:4). The accuracy of Alma’s record is shown by the fact that he quotes Abinadi’s breaking off in the middle of the second commandment when interrupted by the guilty verdict (Mosiah 12:37), then his picking up mid-commandment, where he had left off, when he continued (Mosiah 13:12).

When Noah interrupted Abinadi’s message to declare him “mad,” the prophet had just recited the first commandment, and half of the second, and had accused the court of neither keeping the commandments nor teaching the people to keep

them (see Mosiah 12:37). Much earlier in the discourse Abinadi accused the court of violating another of the Ten Commandments (see Mosiah 21:29). Abinadi also earlier had mocked the priests for “claiming” to teach the law of Moses (Mosiah 12:29–31). So what was new about Abinadi’s message that justified Noah’s abrupt verdict?

Notice that Abinadi had switched roles when King Noah interrupted him. In his earlier response to the priests’ question, Abinadi had played the part of a gadfly, probing them concerning the law and rebuking them for not knowing or teaching it. But, five verses before the verdict (see Mosiah 12:33), Abinadi became an instructor in the law, by stating the eternal significance of the law, reciting the commandments, and challenging the establishment’s interpretation of them. In this new role, Abinadi intended his words to be taken as commentary on the law, and they were taken as such. And since Abinadi’s interpretation of the Mosaic law differed from that which the court accepted, Noah perhaps felt he had spoken “in the name of YHWH that which shall not be or occur,” which Buttonweiser and Craigg said constitutes the crime of false prophecy.

So although Abinadi’s denunciation of their sins and his prophecies of doom angered King Noah and his priests, they still had to find “wherewith to accuse him.” It was not until Abinadi stepped into the role of an instructor in the law that the king felt he could execute Abinadi for being a false prophet, or for being “mad.” This clearly indicates that at least this ancient court based on Hebrew law, corrupt as it was, applied the doctrinal test of a false prophet as Buttonweiser and Craigg propose was intended, rather than the failed prophecy test to which the Rabbis have adhered for centuries.

We must now point out that Abinadi was ultimately executed for a different crime than just discussed, one that may well have fit the rabbinic prophetic definition of false

prophecy. After divine intervention prevented the priests from carrying out Noah's execution order and Abinadi finished his message, he was returned to prison for three days before Noah informs him, "We have found an accusation against thee, and thou art worthy of death" (Mosiah 17:7). This second verdict was based on Abinadi's response to the priests' original question regarding the meaning of Isaiah's prophecy, which Abinadi said meant "that God himself should come down among the children of men" (Mosiah 17:8). It is important to note that this part of Abinadi's discourse was not given until long after Noah declared Abinadi "mad." Why Noah may have been prevented from executing Abinadi when he first ordered it for his being "mad" are beyond the scope of this paper.¹⁰ For our present purposes we need merely point out that the two charges were clearly separate from each other.

The record fails to inform us of the precise nature of this second crime for which Abinadi was ultimately executed. At first blush, this second charge appears to be a good example of false prophecy by the rabbinic failed prophecy definition. Noah indicated that the death sentence was imposed because Abinadi said that "God himself should come down among the children of men," clearly a prophetic utterance. However, the court obviously had no intention of waiting to see if the prophecy would be fulfilled. If the priests felt that God's coming to Earth was too preposterous to ever happen, this final charge may have been one of false prophecy, based on prophetic utterance rather than doctrine. However, using the same reasoning, the second charge may just as well have been one of blasphemy.

A second Book of Mormon trial strongly supports the Buttonweisser/Craigee doctrinal interpretation of the ancient Israelite law of false prophecy. About seventy-five years after Abinadi's trial, Nephi₂, who had resigned as chief judge to preach repentance, arose from his tower prayer to confront a crowd that had gathered to listen to him. Only a small fraction

of Nephi's discourse is preserved in our record, but we are told that because "Nephi had spoken unto them concerning the corruptness of their law" (Helaman 8:3), wicked judges demanded the people "bring him forth, that he may be condemned . . . for his crime . . . [of] revil[ing] against this people and . . . our law" (Helaman 8:1-2). Although the record describes Nephi's supposed crime as one of "reviling the law," it seems logical that Nephi may have been charged with false prophecy, since Israelite law incorporated doctrine into the criminal code (as shown by the law of false prophecy). Nephi's accusations that the doctrinally centered law had been corrupted could hardly be taken as anything less than preaching false doctrine by those who advocated (and enforced) a contrary view of the law.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Nephi's trial is that although the judges were quick to condemn Nephi as a false prophet for his doctrinal disputes with them, they apparently did not even view prophesying the future as possible, let alone as a test of a prophet. Nephi defended himself first by reminding the people that God had helped other prophets foretell the future and then by providing them with a dramatic, immediately verifiable, example: he foretold the murder of their chief judge and the method by which the chief judge's brother would confess the crime (see Helaman 8:27; 9:25-37). That Nephi perceived a need to remind his accusers that God had helped other prophets foretell the future appears to this author as strong evidence that the prediction of future events was not the criteria the accusers were then applying to judge him. Thus, Nephi's trial appears not only to support the Buttonweisser/Craiggie doctrinal interpretation of the law of false prophecy, but to refute the alternative rabbinic interpretation based on foretelling the future.

The Book of Mormon trial of Alma and Amulek similarly, but less forcefully, supports the Buttonweisser/Craiggie reading of the law of false prophecy. The charge of "reviling against the

law” was raised against Amulek in particular, not only by the angry crowd (Alma 14:1–2), but at his arraignment before the chief judge (see Alma 14:4–5), and even after his and Alma’s imprisonment and the burning of their followers (see Alma 14:20). All the arguments stated above in relation to Nephi’s trial apply with equal force to Amulek’s, leading to the conclusion that Amulek was also likely tried for false prophecy. As with Abinadi and Nephi, the court was far more concerned with doctrinal rather than prophetic issues.

We have thus far only considered trials of righteous prophets by corrupt courts. Let us now consider what little the record provides regarding trials of actual false prophets by righteous courts, to see if the rules appear the same. Unfortunately, our record of the only two such trials does not provide much detail.

The first false prophet tried by a righteous judge was Sherem, who is never directly quoted as speaking for God, but who played the role of a prophet by professing a belief in the scriptures (see Jacob 7:10), seeking out the spiritual leader (Jacob) to debate doctrine (see Jacob 7:3), and accusing him of perverting the law of Moses (see Jacob 7:7). Although Jacob disputed doctrine with Sherem, no legal action was initiated, and judgment was left in the hands of God.

The second false prophet tried by a righteous court was Nehor, who preached what “he termed the word of God” (Alma 1:3). Several of Nehor’s doctrines clearly contradicted those commonly accepted (see Alma 1:4), and the record clearly states that his followers taught “false doctrines” after his death (Alma 1:16). However, Nehor apparently never would have been prosecuted but for his murder of a man during a doctrinal dispute (Alma 1:9). After Nehor’s execution for murder, his followers were free to preach false doctrines so long as they did not lie but instead “pretended to preach according to their belief . . . [for] the law could have no power on any man for his belief” (Alma 1:17).

Neither of these anti-Christ seems to have claimed divine authority in the same way as real prophets, by claiming to bring a specific message commissioned of God. It appears they may have done nothing worse than dispute known scriptures. This may be the reason they were never prosecuted for false prophecy. Another explanation might be that they were merely disputing doctrine as opposed to “reviling the law,” which may indicate a false prophecy charge could arise from attacking the law of performances but not from attacking doctrine.

In summary, we find little if any evidence in the Book of Mormon that unfulfilled prophetic utterances about future events were used to judge a prophet false. Instead, we find Nephi having to convince his accusers that God can foretell the future and then using a short-term, verifiable prophecy as a defense. In the one clear example of a prophet (Abinadi) being judged false (mad), the court found the crime to be his challenging, in the name of God, his accusers’ understanding of divine law. The Book of Mormon contains other examples in which it appears that courts applied doctrinal tests to judge prophets false. Therefore, we conclude that ancient Nephite courts likely applied the Buttonweisser/Craigee doctrinal test of false prophecy instead of the rabbinic failed prophecy test.

Notes

1. This paper was originally written under the title of “The Book of Mormon Reveals the Forgotten Law of False Prophecy” by David W. Warby for Law 695R, “Ancient Legal Systems and the Scriptures,” under the supervision of Professor John Welch, fall 1981, BYU J. Reuben Clark Law School. Much of that original work was incorporated into a paper entitled “The Crime of False Prophecy under Ancient Israelite Law” by Lisa Bolin Hawkins and David W. Warby, published by FARMS in 1983. This version was prepared for presentation at the FARMS Symposium on Hebrew Law in the Book of Mormon, 24 February 2001.

2. Hawkins and Warby, "The Crime of False Prophecy," 2-3.
3. Moses Bottenwieser, *The Prophets of Israel: From the Eighth to the Fifth Century* (New York: Macmillan, 1914), 31-32; Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1976), 263.
 4. Bottenwieser, *The Prophets of Israel*, 31-32.
 5. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, 263.
 6. Hawkins and Warby, "The Crime of False Prophecy," 8 n. 10.
 7. Hawkins and Warby, "The Crime of False Prophecy," 17 n. 23.
 8. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations*, trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1950), 3:453.
 9. Robert R. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 230.
 10. For a brief discussion see Hawkins and Warby, "The Crime of False Prophecy," 18 n. 26.